

That one feeling called grief by HoshisamaValmor

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Summary: Karen talks about her feelings the only way she can. For Phoenix of Athena on ao3

That one feeling called grief

Liz's distasteful comment was still haunting Karen on her way home, Holly's hand firmly closed in her own as if they were both afraid to be separated.

"I wonder if the pool will even stay open? Well, I know I won't be there, now that there's nothing pretty to look at anymore."

How utterly disrespectful was to say something like that, specially after such few days? Specially after Billy's and Heather's funerals had just happened, as did so many others? It was just disrespectful to everyone.

Billy had died. Heather had died. Tom and Janet, whom she remembered as far back as her school days, had died. People she had seen and been with just days prior, people she knew for pretty much her whole life even if it was just from seeing them across the street and whom made Hawkins be... Hawkins... they were just gone. Chief Hopper (*Oh God... Joyce...*), children... everyone was shocked and confused and understandably horrified.

The aftermath of the 4th of July was the most chaotic and traumatic experience Karen ever recalled happening in Hawkins. Even with Will Byers's disappearance, it wasn't like this. Not as sudden, drastic and extensive as this. It felt like an unfolding, never-ending nightmare, as more and more people were so fastly turned from 'missing' to 'deceased'.

In a way, maybe Liz's comment was an inappropriate way of dealing with the shock, of trying to forcefully bring some form of normality back, but it just felt insulting.

...or maybe Karen just felt guilty.

She had attended to the Holloway family's funeral. The town's solidarity and mass-loss transpired in pretty much everyone having lost someone or knowing someone who had, and so the funerals were jam-packed with people as close or as random to the families. In her case, she had known the Holloway's, even if she had never been too

close to any of them and Tom had been a bastard to Nancy. And she also attended Billy's. Mike being friends with his younger sister not only explained but justified her presence. The poor girl was devastated, and she was held tight by another girl whom Karen had never seen, but she was on Chief Hopper's funeral as well, where she was the one being held by Joyce. It was simply too much to be described, too much pain and loss, and needing to physically distance oneself from all that death was both understandable and necessary, but it also felt like an unjust privilege. Being lucky to not have lost anyone instead felt like an ostentation of superiority.

And...

Karen sighed, feeling that weight pulling her down even though she had to hold on for Holly, for Mike, for Nancy. For Ted. Because Liz's comment voiced something ugly and terrible inside of her... and Karen was ashamed of it.

All of them flirted with Billy. It was an entirely harmless ordeal, truly. But then... that one night where she almost...

Of course, nothing had happened. But she had hurt Billy. She had played into her own little fantasy and turned a harmless thing into something real and hurtful for everyone. She was the adult one, winding a teenager, *a child as old as her own daughter for God's sake*, into something *wrong* and then she did the right thing when the time came, yes, God yes she had done the right thing in not showing up, but still, it had been wrong to begin with and it had hurt Billy. And now he was dead.

She knew she wasn't guilty of something as horrible as his death, obviously (she still wasn't sure why so many people were at the mall that night and how that fire had started though, even if she had read it on the newspaper already, it all just felt unreal and untrue), but she was guilty of what had happened - *not happened* - between them. She was guilty of the fact that the last time she had talked to him, he had been hurt and unwell and told her to stay away.

Then Liz made that comment, and it resonated into that ugly, ugly part of her; the one that had painted Billy as her personal little guilty pleasure with no regards of him as a real and full person. Had she

reduced a boy into a simple object? Into a detour of her monotonous life?

She truly wished she didn't. But the weight in her chest was so hard to ignore.

"Mom?"

Karen startled up at the sound and turned around to see Nancy holding Holly by the hand. She realized Nancy had probably been speaking or calling her and she completely ignored her.

"I'm sorry, I... I wasn't..."

"Holly was fiddling with the cookie jar," Nancy said, her brows knitted. She quickly told Holly to leave the jar and go play instead while Karen sighed, massaging her temple and trying to settle her thoughts and her mind, but in the midst of this chaos, it was ever so harder. "Mom? Is everything alright?"

"Yes, Nance, I..." she began, quickly finding the words meeting a lump on her throat. She sighed again and looked up to Nancy's eyes. "No, it's not. I'm... I'm at shock with all this, Nance. I still can't believe that so many people have died... that you and Mike could have died... I..."

"Mom, we're fine," Nancy reassured her immediately. "Mike is fine, I'm fine. I know... it's horrible. It *was* horrible, and it's a living nightmare, but... we have to be strong. We have to be strong for us and for everyone else who has lost someone."

"I know. I know. I just..." Karen paused for a moment, feeling the urge to speak, knowing it was wrong, *again*, it was *wrong* but what on earth was wrong with her lately that she did everything wrong?! "It made me think back."

Nancy's frown deepened and she approached Karen.

"Think back?"

Karen gaped, realizing what she had said and what she had to do now, trying to regain some form of control in what her mouth was

saying. She couldn't, she *couldn't* say this, specially not to her own daughter - what kind of a mother would? - but that weight was so heavy, all that death made it hard to breathe. Maybe she could... somehow... relieve it a bit? Even if she didn't deserve it?

"I... someone I knew. He died when I was younger." The bile of the lie stung her and rightfully worked its way to make her feel worse; now she added blatant lying over it all? But unbeknownst of her mother's horrible self, Nancy, bless her heart, sat down instead, feeling how Karen needed it, how it would be the only thing that would really help right now. Karen felt her body mirror Nancy's, falling limp on another chair. She hesitated, taking a second to ask herself if she was really going to do this, working the rough outlines of this cheap lie. And then she spoke. "I was roughly your age, but I already knew your father. It was... it wasn't anything, really. He was just a pretty boy I fancied. It was just a simple crush. I loved your father, but I..."

God, what am I doing?

"You were young," Nancy said in her defence, forcing a strained chuckle out of Karen, that sting pinning harder in her chest. "You shouldn't feel guilty about it."

"I know. I do know," she insisted to try and convince herself. "But I feel... I felt guilty. Guilty that I was being unfaithful to your father, but also... mostly guilty that I might have... that I might've hurt him. The boy, I mean. Or worst, guilty that I-"

Words trailed to silence. Nancy gave her a moment to try and grab a hold of them before she took it to herself to try and guess.

"... that you wish you'd done something?"

"No!" Karen reacted at once. "Not like that... I mean... I suppose I felt guilty for having those feelings to begin with. That maybe I gave him all the wrong signs, but I am with your father and I could never... God, I don't... I shouldn't even be talking to you about this. I am your mother, not the other way around..."

"Mom." Nancy reached her hand forward and held Karen's tightly. She looked to her daughter and tried to gather the strength she saw

in it. "It's alright. You know you can talk to me. What happened... was horrible. It's normal it might have brought back some memories of the past, specially painful ones like that. What happened to that boy?"

"He... he just died." Although she had thought about it so many times already, although she had been to his funeral and stood at a distance, the words felt so heavy said out loud. "It was so sudden, and I felt... guilty that I might have done something wrong, to *him*. That I hurt him by feeding into that thing that would not happen, and that I was just vile and he didn't deserve it. But he's dead, and although I know I could not have done anything to stop it, I... I guess I just feel... guilty."

A little of the weight seemed to leave her as she exhaled. Nancy was still holding her hand, her lips pressed.

"I think... maybe it's grief instead." Nancy squeezed her fingers a bit to catch her attention. "You didn't get to see that your feelings weren't bad or harmful. Maybe they were strong, maybe they were just a passing crush... And you didn't get to see that they didn't hurt that boy, that he'd be alright with or without them. It's just... it'll never be known, and that's sad."

Karen listened to the words and they pulled a sigh out of her. A tiny bit of the weight went with it. She squeezed her daughter's hands and pressed her lips together, her gaze dropped on their hold.

"Mom?" Nancy hesitated. "Are you sure..."

Karen lifted her eyes and now *this* was guilt, plastered all over her face for anyone to see, specially someone as bright as Nancy, but instead, she waved her head.

"Nothing. I hope I helped."

"I shouldn't need help, Nance. I'm an adult and a mother and..."

"And you hold all of us. You deserve to get all the help you need."

She had done a lot of wrong things lately, but God, being close to her children again was the good that came out of it. The hug Nancy

wrapped around her pressed more of that heaviness out of her.

Little by little, the weight would leave her. Grief weighted less than guilt. It wouldn't be fully gone, not all of it, not forever, but it would be bearable.

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Author's Note: I was very happy with Phoenix_of_Athena's comment on my other Karen & Billy piece and so I wanted to write more about them, even if it was pretty damn hard and I wasn't too sure how it'd turn out. I don't know if you like it, but I hope it wasn't too disastrous.

Written to 4 runs of the instrumental version of *The Human Romance* album by Darkest Hour.

To everyone else, thanks for reading and feedback is appreciated. Disclaimer at the end but obviously don't own Stranger Things.